

## **Meanwhile Over in the English Class:**

### **The Missing Islamic World View**

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Islam is a way of life. Its principles operate in every avenue of one's life. However too many Muslims act as though English, History, and Science are beyond the scope of Islam. It is commonly assumed that moral teaching happens, or should happen, only in the Islamic Studies class. However, if we compare what is being taught in the Islamic Studies class with what is being taught, consciously or unconsciously in the English class, an unwelcome surprise awaits us. Examining the reading material in the English classes reveals that too much of the material is actually going against Islamic norms and principles.

It is imperative for principals and other school administrators to be aware of what is actually being taught through the reading materials in the English class. The administration should be aware of the problems associated with what is missing from the reading materials, and also have a plan of how to correct the problem.

Part I of this paper will discuss the needs of the student, in terms of successfully benefiting from school instruction. Part Two will present a list of unIslamic ideas that are often present in the reading material, and suggestions will be made as to how to correct these problems.

It is impossible for the Islamic Studies class to teach Islamic behavior and commitment unless the other classes also reflect the Islamic worldview. Principles can play an important role in facilitating the integration of an Islamic worldview into the 'academic' subjects.

Why aren't our Islamic schools more successful in producing better practicing Muslims? I suggest that part of the reason lies in the contradictory lessons we are teaching. Although most of us are not aware of it, the content of the books we use to teach reading affects the self image of our students, which in turn has a discouraging effect on the reading abilities of students as well as a negative cumulative effect on their Islamic behavior.

The reality of most Islamic schools is that non Muslim American curriculum and textbooks hold sway over at least two-thirds of the school day while the Islamic oriented subjects of religion, Qur'an and/or Arabic are often relegated to one period per day. The underlying and unstated basis for this is the assumption that the curriculum and textbooks are morally and socially neutral. As one Muslim speaker said in an international English conference in Malaysia (1997), "English literature is morally neutral, so why shouldn't we teach Shakespeare?"

Are the textbooks we use in our Islamic school morally neutral? Look at this story of George and Martha, two hippo children who are best friends:

Martha wants to go on a picnic with George.  
She finds George in his bed.  
He doesn't want to go on a picnic..

She puts his bed on roller skates.  
When they get to the park, George wakes up..  
George is awake. He is ready to play. Martha falls asleep on the grass.

Is this an acceptable story to use in your first grade class? It is a typical story found in the reading textbooks. The author would probably say the story is just for fun and doesn't teach any lesson. However, every story is based on some moral principles, even if they are unstated. Some of the un-Islamic principles here are:

George and Martha are different genders. It is good for a girl's best friend to be a boy.  
It is acceptable for a girl to go into a boy's bedroom when he is in bed.  
It is acceptable for a friend to make someone do something against his will. (George did not want to wake up to go on a picnic)  
No parents are necessary.

### **The Content of Reading Material**

American education has had several shifts in the contents of its reading and literature texts. The first textbook series, the McGuffey Readers, used stories with a moral stated at the bottom of each page. The approach that strongly influences the reading material in today's public schools emphasizes the child. This approach says that literature should foster personal growth, and should reflect the reality that the child lives in. 'Appreciation' and 'engagement' are seen as more important than essential skills or cultural heritage or moral lessons. Comprehension questions ask the reader to evaluate his feelings toward the selection. This child-centered approach can be easily seen in today's reading series of the main textbook publishers.

The textbooks now are filled with popular trade book stories, complete with original illustrations. Neither the moral nor value of any potential inclusion is relevant. It does not matter if any good values are taught, as long as every story is 'well written' and has 'beautiful illustrations' and is selling well as a trade book.

The justification for the selection of material is often stated quite frankly. In Macmillan's Literature Series (1985), the eighth grade text, *Enjoying Literature* begins, "Why do we read literature? The title of this book gives the answer. We read literature to enjoy it.... Through literature we may enjoy new adventures, challenges, and victories ... Enjoyment also includes understanding ... ourselves better and to understand what we see."

The Islamic world view stresses the idea that all our actions should be focused on pleasing Allah and doing good for ourselves and others. Although an occasional just-for-fun story is fine, the majority of what is read should be based on Islamic values, and aim to improve the life of the reader in an Islamic manner. Reading skills can be taught using a variety of reading materials, including those which foster Islamic values.

### **The Needs of Muslim Students**

Muslim students have four main needs that should be addressed by the content of the English/Language arts curriculum. These needs are for academic excellence, American and

Muslim cultural literacy, self-esteem for themselves as Muslim-Americans, and values consistent with Islam. Every one of these needs has a relevance to producing educated, practicing Muslims.

1. **Academic excellence** is a universal goal of all Islamic schools. One important aspect of this is skills – how to add, how to decipher what a word and/or sentence means, how to read a map, etc. Reading skills can be taught using a wide variety of reading materials. Unfortunately the decision of which stories to use in today’s public schools is based on what students LIKE to read. And what students like to read is often based on what they are enjoying seeing on TV or movies. Some of the obvious values hidden in current TV and movie fare are values diametrically opposed to Islamic values. We will be identifying some of these a bit later. There are also several little acknowledged factors to be considered in order to improve academic excellence, and specifically to improve the learning of the language arts of reading, writing, speaking and listening. These include the need to read material that will increase the student’s self esteem, and the need for a consistent value system.
2. Academic achievement is one important need of Muslim students. Another equally important need is **positive self imagine, or self esteem**. Not only is it a need in itself, but it also plays an important role in teaching English skills.

Self esteem is partially based on one’s appreciation of one’s own culture. As Muslim-Americans, our students should appreciate their American cultural identity but they should also appreciate their Muslim cultural identity. Study after study indicates that students learn best when the subject matter of the material is familiar to them, and when it reflects positively on their home culture. If the child never hears anything about his home culture, and only hears positive information about what he is not, then he begins to feel that he and his family and his culture, skin, religion, etc. have no value. If nothing in school relates to him, then he loses interest in learning, and often turns to anti-social behavior, rationalizing that if what he is, isn't good, then he will be as bad as possible. Immigrants all too often find that their children, who spoke their family language well at age four or five, suddenly refuse to speak a single word of it after going to school for awhile. Sometimes the child even refuses to answer to his given name, insisting that his name is Tom or Bob. If there is no mention of Muslim in any text or activity, then the child internalizes that this aspect of his life is undesirable and he does his best to hide this aspect of himself. This problem is worst if the child goes to a public school where there are no other Muslims in his classroom. But it can also be present in an Islamic school if he has a non Muslim teacher using the public school textbooks. In the study of school reading textbooks that I did several years ago, there wasn’t even one mention of a Muslim, or Muslim culture, not even a mention of Eid, although Christmas and Hanukah were featured. Not one mention in any reading textbook in kindergarten, nor in first grade, nor in second grade, nor in third, or fourth or fifth or sixth or seventh or eighth or ninth or tenth or eleventh nor in most twelfth. Not one Muslim is mentioned; not one Muslim holy day appears in any story.

Arthur Applebee states in his NAE report, *Literature and U.S. History*, "Students are more likely to know and remember information concerning topics about which they

have a particular interest or those more likely to be related to their cultural backgrounds."

Other research studies have shown that students are better readers when they are reading on a familiar topic. One study done with a group of Christian students and a group of Jewish students found that each group read faster, recalled more, made fewer errors and made better inferences in the passage about their own religious practices.

According to Brookover, et al, the academic self-concept of students is highly related to their general self-concept, their ability to perform academic work, and their ability to function competently among peers.

3. **Value consistent material** in early grades. We all know it is important to be consistent in what we teach. What happens when the Islamic studies teacher teaches one set of values and behavior, but the English teacher teaches another? In the religion class the Muslim child is taught the sanctity of the family. The family is the basic unit of society. He has the right to have his mother and father care for him. He gets help from his older siblings and he is expected to help with the younger ones. Then the child goes to the English/language arts class, and story after story ignores the family and talks about how nice it is to just be with friends. Some stories suggest that parents are foolish, or that it is acceptable to lie to them as long as you don't get caught. What are the child's limits, how is he supposed to order his life? Children who receive mixed messages quite often pick what is easiest, rather than what is best, or they ignore all the messages. It is a very confusing time for the child and as he enters puberty, it becomes even more confusing.

So the question is, are the stories teaching un-Islamic values? And if so, what values are they teaching that we should be aware of?

My own analysis of two textbook series for grades 1-8, by Houghton Mifflin and Harcourt Brace, <sup>ii</sup> found a lack of common stories, but an abundance of common cultural/moral principles that go against values held by Muslims. These include the following:

- a. **Importance of the individual**  
From the story contents it appears that the basic unit of society is the individual. Stating in the introduction to the selection of stories that the value is courage or adaptability, the story generally centers about a youth who is by accident or design on his/her own in the wilderness. Inevitably the heroine is able to function well without the aid of God or family or society. This goes against the Islamic concept that God has arranged humankind with the family as its basic unit.
- b. **Importance of freedom**  
Along with the concept of the individual as the basis of society is the concept that 'freedom' is a main goal. The individual must be free to choose his/her own way. Neither the school nor the parents should attempt to direct the student into any direction, neither religious, nor moral, nor economic. The student should be given ample

freedom to grow and develop according to his latent faculties and/or desires, and no external influence should be allowed to direct his thinking or character into specific moulds. There should be nothing, like responsibility for example, to limit one's freedoms.

c. **Art for art's sake**

One of the freedoms featured in some stories is that of choosing one's occupation according to what one feels like doing, regardless of its possible social benefit. Often there are stories about a youth who went on to study art or football or other 'soul satisfying' passion, despite his/her parents' advice. They are always successful and the parents are proud of them for 'doing their own thing'. There is never a story which suggests that a student should think of what he/she could do as a profession that would help society.

**Non-importance of God**

Because the individual is everything, then God is nothing. There is no mention of God in any of the textbooks. It is the individual him/herself. It is man alone who conquers the elements. There is however no problem in mentioning false gods. Greek and Roman mythology, Norse gods, African gods, Eskimo gods on totem poles are all acceptable as multi cultural elements. Only the God of Jews, Christians and Muslims is missing.

d. **Witches and magic**

Stories with magic have always been enjoyed in Muslim cultures, but there is always a sense, either bluntly stated or clearly implied, that Allah is firmly in charge and even magic is not out of his domain. In the *1001 Nights*, the fisherman who fishes up a magical talking fish, knows it is magical, and he gives thanks to Allah for sending it to him. However, today's stories contain no reference to a higher being. Magic reigns supreme. If you have a problem, go to the one with magic to help you. Be very afraid of black magic because the only thing that can save you is stronger good magic, or some important human element such as love or innocence.

Another problem with magic in the stories for today's children is that too often the witch and/or magic is found in normal life. In one story for example the children find a dragon in their cupboard and go next door to ask their grandmother for help. She is clearly a witch, with the proper hat and broomstick to prove it, and she mixes up a potion to help them. This juxtaposition of reality and fiction can too easily confuse a child.

**Non-importance of family**

From the beginning grades through the tenth grade, positive family and/or sibling interaction is generally missing. In one first grade textbook, for example, which contains 22 stories, only five mention family or any member of the family in a positive manner.

This is not to suggest that the family has to be featured or even present in each story, but when the family is consistently downgraded, then it becomes a problem for Muslims. Is there perhaps a connection between the downgrading of families in stories, and the rude and dismissive behavior of many children toward their parents and other adults? Instead of turning to advice and/or help from a parent, the stories stress that a child's best friend, confidant and source of help should be a friend of the same age. The

only notable exceptions are the stories highlighting independence, where the central character copes without any person to help.

e. **Importance of male-female interaction**

From the earliest grades, and included in almost every year's reading material is the idea that boys and girls should be best friends and/or romantic pairs. There wasn't even one story suggesting that males and females might be happier or better off if they didn't mix socially.

g. **Importance of dogs**

A dog is better than parents or siblings. There are many stories where one's own pet dog or some wild animal is turned to for emotional support or guidance. Muslims however are advised to use dogs only for hunting or protection and never as house pets.

h. **Acceptance of lying**

Lying is permissible as long as you can get away with it. The story is often humorous, relating the funny after effects of the lie, but without implying in any way that lying is morally wrong.<sup>iii</sup>

i. **Other religions are more important**

Celebrating Christmas, Halloween and Hanukah is fun and often heartwarming. Eid has no value because it is not even mentioned.

j. **Other cultures are more important**

As cultural diversity becomes more important, textbooks are hurrying to include stories from different cultures – stories about non-Muslim African-Americans, Jewish, Hispanics, Vietnamese, Japanese and Chinese; in fact cultures from every group of immigrants or minorities in this country EXCEPT Muslims.

k. **Interest (riba) is good**

Most of the problem stories are fiction, but educators need to watch out for non-fiction selections as well. One current textbook has an article featuring the benefits of putting your money in a bank so it will earn interest, which is forbidden in Islam.

**Analysis of reading material used in public schools**

One popular argument for using public school textbooks is that Muslim students need to be reading what other American students are reading. But Arthur Applebee's study of curriculum and other studies<sup>iv</sup> found that until Grade 9, there was no text that was found in all schools. In Grade 9 only one text, *Romeo and Juliet*, was found to be common, and that was in only 76% of schools. Grade 11 American literature and Grade 12's British literature were somewhat more consistent in the use of same texts across schools. Even in this case there were only 17 selections common to seven reading series used in the two upper grades. So even if we use the stories in one reading series, it doesn't mean our students will be reading what other American students are reading. In fact although most public schools use popular stories to teach reading, many, or perhaps most, private schools use classical literature to teach reading.

For Islamic school curriculum concerns, the reading **skills** taught in good public schools should be included in Islamic schools, but the skills can be taught using material that may be more relevant to Muslim students.

In conclusion, the reading material is not neutral. It often goes against Islamic values and morals. So what can you as a principal or teacher do?

1. Use the Islamic School League's reading list when purchasing new fiction for your school library. [www.theisla.org](http://www.theisla.org). Evaluate the books you currently have in your school library, and remove the most objectionable.
2. Have a teacher's workshop where language arts/English teachers are informed about the problem values and are shown how to identify them
3. Encourage your teachers to identify unacceptable stories in the reading text books; omit teaching them, and substitute better stories. These better stories can be taken from the Suggested reading list, or from such Islamic sources as *Ayat Jamilah: Beautiful Signs: A Treasury of Islamic Wisdom*<sup>v</sup> by Sarah Conover and Freda Crane which contains 40 interesting short stories with Islamic values. Although written for sixth grade readers, many of the stories are suitable for both younger and older readers.<sup>1</sup>
4. Encourage your English teachers and other avid readers to contribute titles, and/or critiques of books to add to the Islamic Schools League's lists.

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<sup>i</sup> Applebee, Arthur. *Literature and US. History*. Report No. 17-HL-01, Oct., 1987, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, p3Lipson, M.Y. "The Influence of religious affiliation in children's memory for text information.", *Reading Research Quarterly* XVIII 1983, p. 448-457.

<sup>ii</sup> *Invitations to Literacy*, Grades 1-8, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1996, and *Signatures* grades 1-8m Harcourt Brace, Orlando, 1997.

<sup>iii</sup> Shamma, Freda, "The Curriculum Challenge for Islamic Schools in America," *Muslims and Islamization in North America. Problems and Prospects*, ed Amber Haque, Amana Pub, Baltimore, 1999.

<sup>iv</sup> Applebee, p. 67.

<sup>v</sup> Conover, Sarah and Freda Crane. *Ayat Jamilah: Beautiful Signs: A Treasury of Islamic Wisdom* · Eastern Washington University Press, 2004.

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<sup>1</sup> Since this article was written, FADEL has produced a book, *Treasury of Muslim Literature*, which contains suitable material for middle –high school.